

Hans-Josef Klauck, *The Religious Context of Early Christianity. A Guide to Graeco-Roman Religions*, translated by Brian McNeil. London and New York: T & T Clark/Continuum, 2000, paperback reprint 2003, pp. xxviii + 516, Stg £ 19.99, ISBN 0 567 08943 6

This book (an English translation of *Die religiöse Umwelt des Urchristentums* [2 vols, Stuttgart 1995-1996]) presents a survey of Graeco-Roman religions aimed at theology students seeking to understand the pagan religious background to the emergence of the Church. Judaism is explicitly excluded because its relationship with Christianity was ‘quite different (because much closer)’ (p. xiii). The material is organised into six chapters: civic and domestic religion; mystery cults; a rather broad category termed ‘popular belief’ that encompasses astrology, soothsaying, miracles and magic; ruler cult; philosophical dimensions; and gnosticism. Every section of each chapter is equipped with detailed bibliographies that are impressively up-to-date. Klauck also provides useful methodological reflections, not only in his general introduction, but also in relation to (e.g.) the definition of mystery cults (pp. 81-90) and the categorization of gnosticism (pp. 429-36). In these excurses Klauck interrogates the extent to which the analytical structures favoured by historians of religion find support in the data contained in the primary sources. Such discussions will provide helpful opportunities for students to engage in informed criticism of the familiar framework within which Graeco-Roman paganism is routinely studied.

Yet some may find fault with the framework that Klauck himself adopts. Consider his distinction between communal civic cult practices and what he terms ‘popular belief’. Klauck is tempted to agree with L. B. Zaidman and P. Schmitt-Pantel’s rejection of this category as vague and without support in the ancient sources (pp. 153-4); but he presses on

regardless. His treatment encompasses the healing cult of Asclepius at Epidaurus and the Sibylline oracles. Yet these had a very public and political dimension, especially in the Roman world, that makes their demarcation as ‘popular belief’ highly unsatisfactory. Perhaps the fault lies with Klauck’s programme: he writes for theology students and constantly appeals to contexts provided by the New Testament. With everything seen through the refracting lens of Christianity, Klauck succumbs to the ‘Christianizing tendencies’ that recent scholarship on Graeco-Roman paganism has roundly rejected. Furthermore, Klauck’s general tendency to impose a normative framework on Graeco-Roman religion means that he obscures paganism’s astonishing diversity. Although Klauck notes regional variety in the context of emperor worship (p. 252), there is little emphasis on this as a broader dynamic of classical paganism (cf. G. W. Bowersock, *Hellenism in Late Antiquity* [Ann Arbor, 1990], 5-9). Other aspects reinforce the impression that a Christianizing discourse dominates the very conception of the book. There is no thematic index, but there *is* one of biblical texts. Finally, Klauck notes the existence of M. Beard, J. North, and S. Price, *Religions of Rome*, 2 vols (Cambridge, 1998), but makes fewer references to it than the major reference work on Roman religion merits.

A short review by its nature dwells on shortcomings. I prefer to conclude by trumpeting some virtues. Much of the book may be read with profit by students studying ancient religion for its own sake and not merely as a context for early Christianity. Treatments of individual topics are incisive, and I will be recommending the chapter on ruler cult, for example, to my students of Roman religion. Above all, by proceeding from primary sources (including inscriptions and papyri and not just literary texts), Klauck provides his

target audience with an excellent model of how to pursue their own analyses. As a student handbook, then, this is on the whole an admirable specimen.

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